



WORKPLACE SAFETY AND HEALTH IN ALASKA

*From The
National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health*



State Profile 2002

*Delivering on the Nation's promise:
Safety and health at work for all people through prevention.*

The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health

NIOSH is the primary federal agency responsible for conducting research and making recommendations for the prevention of work-related illness and injury. NIOSH is located in the Department of Health and Human Services in the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The NIOSH mission is to provide national and world leadership to prevent work-related illness, injury, disability, and death by gathering information, conducting scientific research, and translating the knowledge gained into products and services. As part of its mission, NIOSH supports programs in every state to improve the health and safety of workers. NIOSH has developed this document to highlight recent NIOSH programs important to workers and employers in Alaska.

The Burden of Occupational Illness and Injury in Alaska

- In Alaska, there are approximately 301,000 individuals employed in the workforce.¹
- In 2000, 53 workers died as a result of workplace injuries.²
- The transportation and public utilities industry had the highest number of fatalities, followed second by agriculture, forestry, and fishing, and third by services.²
- In 1999, the most recent year for which data are available, the rate of fatal workplace injuries was 13.9 deaths per 100,000 workers--above the national average rate of 4.5 deaths per 100,000 workers.²
- In 2000, there were 15,400 nonfatal workplace injuries and illnesses in Alaska.³

The Cost of Occupational Injury and Illness in Alaska

In 2000, the most recent year for which data are available, a total of \$155.6 million was paid for workers' compensation claims by Alaska private insurers and self-insured employers.⁴ This figure does not include compensation paid to workers employed by the federal government and also underestimates the total financial burden for private sector businesses, since only a fraction of health care costs and earnings lost through work injuries and illnesses is covered by workers' compensation. Chronic occupational illnesses like cancer are substantially under-reported in workers' compensation systems because work-relatedness is often difficult to establish.

How NIOSH Prevents Worker Injuries and Diseases in Alaska

Health Hazard Evaluations (HHEs) and Technical Assistance

NIOSH evaluates workplace hazards and recommends solutions when requested by employers, workers, or state or federal agencies. Since 1993, NIOSH has responded to 17 requests for HHEs in Alaska in a variety of industrial settings, including the following example:

Dutch Harbor, Alaska: Occupational Asthma

During 1997-2000, NIOSH researchers evaluated aerosol exposures among workers at a crab processing facility in Dutch Harbor, Alaska, at management's request. NIOSH investigators demonstrated both new onset of asthma and an increased burden of respiratory symptoms from exposures related to crab processing. NIOSH recommendations included providing medical evaluation of workers with respiratory symptoms to determine their need for placement out of high exposure jobs, providing information to workers about the disease and how to control or reduce their risk, reducing exposure through ventilation, requiring respirator use for exposed workers with persisting symptoms, and implementing a restricted or no-smoking policy.

Fatality Assessment and Control Evaluation (FACE) Investigations

NIOSH developed the FACE program to identify work situations with a high risk of fatality and to formulate and disseminate prevention strategies. In Alaska, FACE is conducted by the Alaska Department of Health and Social Services under a cooperative agreement with NIOSH. Since 1995, 35 FACE investigations have been conducted in Alaska, including the following example:

Southeast Alaska: Logger and Logging Supervisor Killed by Uprooted Tree

In July 2000, an uprooted tree struck and killed a supervisor and a logger who were part of a crew using a crane to move timber from a slope to a road. The crane, located on the road above the slope, was anchored to an uncut tree on the hillside above the road. At the time of the incident, the crane was dragging a set of logs up the slope. The logs got caught on a tree stump, causing the tree anchoring the crane to fall toward the crane, killing the victims. To prevent similar occurrences, employers should ensure that: workers can recognize hazards and are authorized to modify procedures according to safe logging methods; stumps instead of uncut trees are used as anchors; and workers handling cable systems are trained to rig anchor stumps.

Building State Capacity

Development of State-Based Surveillance

Through this project, the Alaska Department of Health and Social Services will develop and implement a surveillance system for targeted occupational injuries, illnesses, and hazards in the seafood and fish processing industries. Data will be used for epidemiologic studies and prioritizing prevention efforts. Recommendations will be developed for preventing workplace injuries, safety training, and engineering solutions.

The Alaska Field Station

In 1991, after identifying Alaska as the highest-risk state in the United States for job-related traumatic fatalities, NIOSH responded by establishing a research field station in Anchorage. There are currently nine employees at the Alaska Field Station, involved in the following activities:

Fishing and Logging Fatalities

Because the workplace fatality rate in Alaska was almost four times higher than the U.S. average in 1997, NIOSH, through its Alaska Field Station, has been working to develop effective surveillance and prevention programs in collaboration with numerous public and private sector partners. For example, NIOSH worked

with the U.S. Coast Guard, the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB), industry, and workers to determine risk factors and prevention measures in Alaska's hazardous commercial fishing industry. These joint efforts have contributed to a 67% decline in Alaska's commercial fishing deaths from 1990 to 1998. In addition, NIOSH findings were used by the Alaska Department of Labor and the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) to increase oversight of helicopter logging operations. During the early 1990's helicopter logging was the highest-risk occupation in Alaska. NIOSH efforts have contributed to a sharp decline in helicopter logging injuries, with one fatal crash in 1996, and none further through 2001.

Alaska Interagency Aviation Safety Initiative

To address Alaska's disproportionately high number of occupational aviation deaths compared to the other 49 states, NIOSH developed an interagency initiative to reduce aircraft crashes and injuries by at least 50% by the end of 2009. Starting in October 1999, the partnership, which includes FAA, NTSB, the National Weather Service, and Alaska's air transportation industry, gathered and analyzed aircraft crash, injury, and fatality data involving Alaska commuter and air taxi operators in order to identify risk factors. NIOSH has found a strong association between pilot error related to continuing visual flight into instrument meteorological conditions and controlled flight into terrain crashes that account for the majority of air taxi and commuter fatalities. Initial NIOSH research indicated a need for improved weather reporting, improved pilot training in aeronautical decision-making skills, implementation of global positioning and ground proximity and avoidance technology, improved support from federal regulators, and measures to reduce pressure on pilots to fly in deteriorating weather conditions.

Extramural Programs Funded by NIOSH

The following is an example of recent training grants or cooperative agreements funded by NIOSH in the state of Alaska.

Alaska Marine Safety Education Association (AMSEA)

This training project grant provides marine safety training to commercial fishermen in Alaska and in other parts of the U.S. The two goals are to train drill instructors who conduct monthly safety drills on documented fishing vessels as required by the federal Commercial Fishing Vessel Act of 1988, and to continue the support of the AMSEA Marine Safety Instructor network. In fiscal year 2002, the program is also providing training to Maine fishers with supplemental support from NIOSH. Three-hundred-and-sixty fishermen and women were trained in fiscal year 2001.

Additional information regarding NIOSH services and activities can be accessed through the NIOSH home page at <http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/homepage.html> or by calling the NIOSH 800-number at 1-800-356-NIOSH (1-800-356-4674).

¹U.S. Department of Labor (DOL), Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), Local Area Unemployment Statistics, Current Population Survey, 2000.

²DOL, BLS in cooperation with state and federal agencies, Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries, 1999-2000.

³DOL, BLS in cooperation with participating state agencies, Survey of Occupational Injuries and Illnesses, 2000.

⁴National Academy of Social Insurance, *Workers' Compensation: Benefits, Coverage, and Costs, 2000 New Estimates*, May 2002.

